

Message Text

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AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 07222

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, PR, PINT
SUBJECT: FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE -- FEBRUARY

1977

SUMMARY. CAMPAIGN POLITICKING DOMINATED THE INTERNAL SCENE IN FEBRUARY, AS THE COUNTRY PREPARED FOR THE FIRST ROUND OF NATIONWIDE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS TO BE HELD ON MARCH 13. MAINLY OF LOCAL SIGNIFICANCE IN PREVIOUS YEARS, THIS YEAR'S ELECTIONS HAVE BEEN POLITICIZED TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT THEY ARE ALREADY BEING TOUTED AS A TEST OF MAJORITY VS. LEFT OPPOSITION STRENGTH AND AS A PRECURSOR OF NEXT YEAR'S SCHEDULED LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. BY THE MARCH 5 FILING DEADLINE, BOTH THE MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION COALITIONS HAD AGREED ON COMMON LISTS IN APPROXIMATELY 200 CITIES WITH A POPULATION OVER 30,000, MEANING THAT THERE WILL BE "PRIMARIES" IN THE REMAINING 10 PERCENT OF THE LARGE CITIES. PARISIANS HAVE BEEN RECEIVING DAILY SITREPS ON THE "BATTLE FOR PARIS", THE MAYORAL ELECTION IMBROGLIO THAT HAS DIVIDED THE MAJORITY PARTIES AND DAMAGED PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING'S PRESTIGE; ELSEWHERE AROUND THE COUNTRY THE MAJORITY AND UNION OF THE LEFT COALITIONS HAVE BEEN HOLDING UP RATHER WELL. WITH ONLY A FEW DAYS TO GO BEFORE ELECTION DAY ALL EYES ARE NOW TURNED TO THE FINAL RESULTS AND ANALYSES -- AND TO THE POLITICAL AND PERHAPS GOVERNMENT CHANGES THAT ARE TO FOLLOW. END SUMMARY.

1. THE PARIS SCENE: THE MUNICIPAL ELECTORAL PERIOD IN PARIS BEGAN OFFICIALLY ON FEBRUARY 25, NEWS TO MOST PARISIANS WHO HAVE ALREADY ENDURED MONTHS OF ACTIVE CAMPAIGN POLITICKING. WITH 149 LISTS AND 875 CANDIDATES
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RUNNING FOR THE 109 MUNICIPAL COUNCIL SEATS, THE PARIS MAYORAL CIRCUS CERTAINLY HAS ENOUGH ACTS. FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES, HOWEVER, THE ELECTION REMAINS A THREE-WAY RACE AMONG FORMER PRIME MINISTER JACQUES CHIRAC, INDUSTRY AND RESEARCH MINISTER MICHEL D'ORNANO, AND AN AS YET UNDECIDED UNION OF THE LEFT CANDIDATE. AT THE SAME TIME, IF THE MAJORITY CANNOT AGREE ON WHICH OF ITS TWO CANDIDATES SHOULD RECEIVE FULL BACKING, IT MAY HAVE TO TAKE REFUGE IN ANOTHER COMPROMISE CANDIDATE TO PREVENT THE LEFT'S MAN FROM WINNING BY DEFAULT. IT IS NO SECRET THAT DISCORD AMONG THE MAJORITY PARTIES CONTINUES TO OVERSHADOW THE CAMPAIGN (PARIS 6573). CHIRAC AND D'ORNANO HAVE BEEN RUNNING ENERGETIC AND ISSUE-ORIENTED CAMPAIGNS, HAVE REFRAINED FROM ATTACKING EACH OTHER PERSONALLY, AND HAVE AGREED TO WITHDRAW THEIR LISTS IN SECOND-ROUND BALLOTING IN THOSE SECTORS WHERE THE OTHER CANDIDATE'S LISTS COME OUT AHEAD. BUT IN CONTRAST TO THIS SUPERFICIAL ENTENTE, THEIR WORKING LEVEL HATCHETMEN ARE OUT IN FORCE. THE GAULLIST (RPR) HIEARACHY

(MONOD, LABBE, BAS) AND THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICAN PARTY POWERS IN PARIS (PONIATOWSKI, CHINAUD, DOMINATI) ARE ENGAGED IN AN ALL-OUT SLUGFEST THAT WILL PROBABLY CONTINUE EVEN AFTER A MAYOR IS FINALLY CHOSEN FROM AMONG THE ELECTED MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS. THIS ESCALATING RPR-IR CONTROVERSY HAS SPILLED OVER TO THE CENTER PARTIES, ALREADY IN DISARRAY FOLLOWING SEVERAL HIGH-LEVEL PARTY DEFECTIONS TO CHIRAC'S STANDARDS. MINISTER OF STATE LECANUET, RADICAL SOCIALIST SERVAN-SCHREIBER, AND STATE SECRETARY FOR CULTURE GIROUD -- HERSELF A CANDIDATE IN PARIS -- HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY VOCAL IN THEIR CRITICISMS OF CHIRAC. AND EVEN PRIME MINISTER BARRE HAS GOTTEN INTO THE ACT BY REAFFIRMING HIS SUPPORT FOR

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D'ORNANO'S CANDIDACY AND HALF IGNORING CHIRAC'S APPEAL FOR NON-PARTISAN NEUTRALITY. RPR GOVERNMENT MINISTERS, WARNED BY BARRE NOT TO CONFUSE THEIR PARTY AFFILIATION WITH THEIR GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTIONS, HAD BEEN NOTICEABLY QUIESCENT AND CIRCUMSPECT IN THE FACE OF MOUNTING AND RATHER CAUSTIC ANTI-CHIRAC ATTACKS. BUT AT CHIRAC'S URGING, THESE MINISTERS FINALLY COMPLAINED TO BARRE, WHO, IN A BIT OF POLITICAL FENCE-STRADDLING, "SANCTION-ED" PARTISAN CAMPAIGNING -- AS LONG AS IT IS NOT DIVISIVE TO THE MAJORITY.

2. TO THE SURPRISE OF SOME OBSERVERS, THE LEFT OPPOSITION FINALLY AGREED ON UNIFIED LISTS FOR PARIS. THE SOCIALISTS AND COMMUNISTS HAVE YET TO COME UP WITH A MUTUALLY ACCEPTABLE CHOICE FOR MAYOR, ALTHOUGH PS (CERES) LEADER GEORGES SARRE AND PCF HENRI FISZBIN, THE TWO DECLARED LEFT CANDIDATES, ARE PRESENTLY THE MOST LOGICAL CHOICES. BUT THE LEFT IS FENDING OFF SUCH SPECULATION ABOUT THE FUTURE, PREFERRING TO CONCENTRATE ON STREET CAMPAIGNING FOR THE FIRST ROUND VOTE. UNTIL THE VOTES ARE IN, IT WILL MAINTAIN THAT THE CHOICE OF MAYOR IS A DECISION FOR THE COUNCILLORS THEMSELVES. FOR THE UNITED LEFT IN PARIS, THE MAIN HOPE OF WINNING THE MAYORALTY IS THAT THE MAJORITY WILL FALL APART, ALLOWING THE LEFT TO SNEAK IN, AN UNLIKELY BUT NOT ALTOGETHER IMPOSSIBLE OUTCOME.

3. THE CAMPAIGN IN THE PROVINCES: MAJORITY DISCORD AND DISSENSION IN PARIS, WHILE FOLLOWED WITH KEEN INTEREST IN THE PROVINCES, HAVE HAD LITTLE FALL-OUT EFFECT ON
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LOCAL ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS. BY THE MARCH 5 FILING DEADLINE, BOTH THE MAJORITY AND THE LEFT OPPOSITION HAD AGREED ON COMMON LISTS IN ABOUT 200 OF THE 221 CITIES WITH A POPULATION OF OVER 30,000. CAMPAIGNS CONTINUE TO BE CONDUCTED FOCUSSED ON LOCAL ISSUES, WITH ONLY MINIMAL ASSISTANCE (OR INTERFERENCE) FROM THE VARIOUS PARTIES' PARIS-BASED ORGANIZATIONS. GOVERNMENT MINISTERS, MANY OF WHOM ARE ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN THEIR OWN CAMPAIGNS, HAVE NOT BEEN ASKED TO ANY GREAT EXTENT TO PARTICIPATE IN LOCAL POLITICKING OUTSIDE THEIR DISTRICTS.

4. AFTER AN INITIAL EUPHORIC PERIOD FOLLOWING THE DECEMBER PARTY ASSIZES, CHIRAC'S RPR IS EXPERIENCING A DECLINE IN ITS MOMENTUM. DESPITE RPR CLAIMS THAT IT NOW HAS 400,000 MEMBERS, 150,000 OF WHOM HAVE PURPORTEDLY JOINED SINCE LAST DECEMBER, THE PARTY IS STILL NOT MAKING ANY SIGNIFICANT INROADS INTO THE LEFT ELECTORATE. SEVERAL PARTY DEFECTIONS HAVE BEEN PLAYED UP IN THE MEDIA: STATE SECRETARY FOR OVERSEAS TERRITORIES OLIVIER STIRN RESIGNED FROM THE PARTY TO FORM A NEW GROUP, THE MOUVEMENT DES SOCIAUX LIBERAUX, SEEKING TO RALLY DISSIDENT GAULLISTS AND SOCIALISTS OPPOSED TO THE COMMON PROGRAM ALLIANCE; TWO RPR DEPUTIES IN STRASBOURG RESIGNED FROM THE PARTY AFTER HAVING BEEN EXCLUDED FROM LOCAL MUNICIPAL LISTS; AND IN PARIS TWO RPR CANDIDATES (INCLUDING DEPUTY BENOUVILLE, THE RIGHT-HAND MAN OF WEALTHY INDUSTRIALIST AND RPR FINANCIAL BACKER MARCEL DASSAULT) JUMPED TO D'ORNANO'S LISTS. SUCH RUMBLINGS WERE PROBABLY INEVITABLE, AND, AS IN THE STRASBOURG CASE PROBABLY REPRESENT A BIT OF PARTY HOUSECLEANING. THEY CONTINUE TO BE ISOLATED EVENTS AND DO NOT REFLECT A MORE SERIOUS INTERNAL PARTY PROBLEM, AS THE VAST MAJORITY OF RPR MEMBERS CONTINUE TO BE FIRMLY BEHIND CHIRAC.

5. A NEW FACTOR INFLUENCING THE NATIONAL POLITICAL SCENE IS THE ECOLOGY MOVEMENT WHICH IS SUDDENLY GAINING CONFIDENTIAL

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CONSIDERABLE PUBLICITY AND ATTENTION. FOR THE FIRST TIME ECOLOGY CANDIDATES MAY BE "SPOILERS" IN SOME CLOSE ELECTIONS. THE MOVEMENT'S AREAS OF STRENGTH ARE DIFFUSED AND ITS SUPPORTERS HETEROGENEOUS, ALTHOUGH MANY VOTERS APPEAR TO BE DRAWN FROM THE LEFT. ECOLOGY CANDIDATES SHOULD HAVE ONLY A MINOR IMPACT ON MOST ELECTIONS (ESTIMATES OF THEIR POLLING STRENGTH VARY BETWEEN 6-12 PERCENT), BUT THE MAJOR PARTIES ARE NOT TAKING ANY CHANCES; MOST CANDIDATES HAVE ALREADY INCORPORATED SOME FORM OF ECOLO-

GY PLANK IN THEIR RESPECTIVE PLATFORMS.

6. IN THE MIDST OF AN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN DESIGNED IN PART TO PROJECT A PUBLIC IMAGE OF MODERATION AND ACCEPTABILITY, IT WAS PECULIAR TO FIND THE PS AND THE PC ENGAGED IN A DIVISIVE PUBLIC DISPUTE OVER THE POLICY ON NATIONALIZATION TO BE FOLLOWED SHOULD THE LEFT COME TO POWER IN 1978. PS ECONOMISTS ARGUED THAT A FORM OF NON-VOTING INDEXED DIVIDEND STOCK SHOULD BE ISSUED AS

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COMPENSATION TO SHARE-HOLDERS, WHEREAS THE PC SPOKESMEN COUNTERED THAT SUCH A PLAN WOULD DEFEAT THE PURPOSE OF NATIONALIZATION BY LEAVING OWNERSHIP IN THE HANDS OF NON-WORKERS. THE DEBATE, INITIATED BY THE PS, WAS ANOTHER IN A SERIES OF ATTEMPTS BY THE PARTY TO PROMOTE AN IMAGE OF RESTRAINT, BUT IN LIGHT OF THE PC RESPONSE, THE WHOLE ISSUE DID LITTLE TO CALM BUSINESSMEN'S FEARS.

7. THE EXECUTIVE: DURING THE COURSE OF A BRIEF VISIT TO BRITTANY, PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING DELIVERED ONE OF HIS INFREQUENT "POLITICAL" SPEECHES BEFORE AN ENTHUSIASTIC CROWD OF 25,000 (PARIS 4134). IN WHAT WAS INTERPRETED BY SOME COMMENTATORS AS HIS FIRST POLEMICAL SPEECH SINCE HIS ELECTION IN 1974, GISCARD FORCEFULLY DECLARED THAT HE WOULD NOT TOLERATE ANY LEFT (OR OTHER) THREAT TO FRENCH INSTITUTIONS, THAT HE WOULD NOT PERMIT INTER-PARTY BICKERING GO SO FAR AS TO DAMAGE THE MAJORITY'S CHANCES OF WINNING IN 1978, AND THAT HE HAD FULL CONFIDENCE IN THE ABILITY OF PRIME MINISTER BARRE. IF VGE WAS HAPPY WITH BARRE'S PERFORMANCE, THE PUBLIC ECHOED THESE SENTIMENTS. BUOYED BY FIGURES SHOWING THAT FOR THE SECOND STRAIGHT MONTH PRICE INCREASES ROSE BY ONLY 0.3 PERCENT, SUSTAINED BY PUBLIC OPINION POLLS INDICATING A 13-POINT JUMP IN POPULARITY SINCE THE LAST POLL (DECEMBER), STEPPING UP HIS VISITS TO THE PROVINCES TO PROMOTE AND EXPLAIN HIS ECONOMIC GAMEPLAN, BARRE IS PROJECTING MORE AND MORE THE IMAGE OF AN EFFECTIVE POLITICIAN, AND AFTER SIX MONTHS IN OFFICE, NO ONE NOW IS ASKING THE QUESTION, "RAYMOND WHO?" BY DOGGEDLY CONCENTRATING ON ECONOMIC MATTERS HE HAS MAINTAINED AN IMAGE

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OF AUTHORITY WHILE LIMITING HIS POLITICAL LIABILITIES, AN IMPORTANT FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO HIS RELATIVE POPULAR SUCCESS. BARRE HAS TO DATE SHOWN HIMSELF TO BE A RATHER ADEPT PERFORMER IN HIS FEW ENTRIES INTO THE POLITICAL ARENA AND HAS MAINTAINED HIS CREDIBILITY WITH ALL FRACTIONS OF THE WARRING MAJORITY PARTIES. HOWEVER, HIS REAL TEST OF POLITICAL ACUMEN SHOULD COME IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, FOLLOWING THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, WHEN HE MAY BE CALLED UPON TO FURTHER ARBITRATE BETWEEN CHIRAC AND THE REST OF THE MAJORITY PARTY LEADERS.

8. MISCELLANEOUS: JEAN-JACQUES SERVAN-SCHREIBER WAS CHOSEN BY THE PRESIDENT TO FILL A VAGUELY-DEFINED MANDATE TO PREPARE A STUDY ON REFORMS. HIS APPOINTMENT IS ALREADY BEING INTERPRETED AS A VGE SLAP AT CHIRAC (JJSS, MINISTER OF REFORMS IN 1974, LASTED LESS THAN TWO WEEKS IN CHIRAC'S CABINET) AND MAY PRESAGE SERVAN-SCHREIBER'S RETURN TO A MORE ACTIVE AND IMPORTANT GOVERNMENT ROLE.

SOVIET DISSIDENT ANDRE AMALRIK MADE A BRIEF BUT HIGHLY PUBLICIZED VISIT TO FRANCE. GISCARD'S REFUSAL TO MEET WITH HIM TOUCHED OFF WIDESPREAD MEDIA CRITICISM AND PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE SUBJECT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE SOVIET UNION. THE ISSUES WERE HEATEDLY DISCUSSED FOR ABOUT A WEEK, BUT THEN GRADUALLY DIED DOWN. JUST HOW DEEPLY FELT AND DIVISIVE THIS TOPIC IS WILL BE AN ISSUE IN THE MONTHS TO COME.
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